



CEPPS/NDI Quarterly Report: January 1 to March 31, 2005

ETHIOPIA: ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION **USAID Associate Cooperative Agreement No. 663-A-00-04-00437-00, under the** **Leader Cooperative Agreement No. DGC-A-00-01-0004-00**

Project Dates: October 1, 2004 to July 31, 2005

I. SUMMARY

Since 1991, Ethiopia has been transitioning from a totalitarian state. Open elections have been conducted since 1995, but were tainted by irregularities and a widespread boycott of the 2000 and 2001 polls. Although conditions have improved in the run-up to the 2005 elections, some uncertainties exist around a range of electoral issues, and political parties have threatened to boycott if conditions for a free and fair election are not established.

With U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) support, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) has been conducting a program to increase political participation and enhance public confidence in the electoral process for the 2005 national elections. NDI's program fills an important gap in current support by meeting the following objectives: to demonstrate domestic and international interest in and support for a transparent and fair electoral process in Ethiopia through an international elections monitoring effort; to identify potential challenges to a transparent and fair electoral process and recommend ways to enhance the process; and to facilitate dialogue between political parties and electoral stakeholders to aid in resolving disagreements prior to the May 2005 elections.

The Institute was focusing activities in two areas: conducting an international election monitoring effort of the 2005 national elections; and, should it be necessary, facilitating a consultative forum between the National Elections Board of Ethiopia and political parties. However, at the end of this quarter, the Government of Ethiopia expelled NDI and its CEPPS partners, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and IFES from Ethiopia. NDI will continue to monitor events in Ethiopia and remains in close contact with the CEPPS partners.

II. BACKGROUND

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) toppled a military dictatorship and vowed to make a clean break with the country's long history of authoritarian rule. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) quickly organized regional and local elections in 1992 followed by an election to select the members of the Constituent Assembly in 1994. A year later in 1995, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia held its

first multiparty elections at the national level. The EPRDF, a coalition of numerous ethnically-based parties, swept the elections and has continued to dominate the political life of the country. As it controls all of the regional councils, the EPRDF also holds sway over the 108-member House of Federation whose members are chosen by the councils. The EPRDF holds nearly 90 percent of the 547 seats in the House of People's Representatives enabling it to select the prime minister.

EPRDF domination is due in part to ongoing government intimidation and harassment of opposition parties and arbitrary detention of their members. However, this trend also reflects the opposition's tendency to boycott elections such as those held in 1994 and 1995 and otherwise opt out of the political process in protest of what they consider to be an uneven playing field. As the opposition continues to be weak and divided, there is a lack of genuine political competition in Ethiopia. One contributing factor to this weakness is the tendency for political parties to be founded on an ethnic basis rather than an overarching ideological one.

The government of Ethiopia has made some political progress recently as evidenced by improved administration of elections, increased public debate around political issues, and other minor concessions to opposition demands such as increased access to state-owned media. However, implementation of reforms has been inconsistent. Prime Minister Meles continues to state his government's commitment to democratization. The Ethiopian constitution, considered by many to be one of the most progressive in Africa, guarantees a democratic order and respect for human and democratic rights.

Many in the international community see the 2005 national and regional elections as a critical litmus test of whether the government's rhetoric will be matched by its actions. Past elections have been a source of conflict marked by irregularities such as intimidation of voters and bias on the part of polling officials who are drawn from the country's civil service. In contravention of the Penal Code, the vast majority of electoral offenses have gone unpunished. Given this context, international observation will provide objective analysis of the overall electoral process and fill an important gap in election-related assistance currently being provided by other donors and implementing partners. Assistance in facilitating dialogue between political parties that have threatened to boycott the polls and electoral stakeholders will allow the two groups to discuss election related disagreements and enhance the confidence and the integrity of the electoral process.

Within this context, NDI's program aimed to:

- demonstrate domestic and international interest in and support for a transparent and fair electoral process in Ethiopia through an international elections monitoring effort;
- identify potential challenges to a transparent and fair electoral process and recommend ways to enhance the process; and
- facilitate dialogue between political parties and electoral stakeholders to aid in resolving disagreements prior to the May 2005 elections.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

In October 2004, NDI's director of southern and east Africa programs met with USAID and its CEPPS partners, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and IFES, to discuss the partners' programs. From the outset of the cooperative agreement, NDI was aware that there could be a reframing of the Institute's primary activities. During this meeting, it was determined that NDI should revise its program description to conduct an international election monitoring program along with a small component to work with political parties to overcome electoral obstacles should the need arise. NDI adjusted its program accordingly and submitted the revised proposal to USAID.

On January 30, NDI's regional representative, Bjarte Tora, traveled to Addis for a series of meetings. Shortly thereafter, NDI was told that The Carter Center might be conducting election-day observation and that the two organizations should discuss how this could best be coordinated. After several discussions with The Carter Center and USAID, it was decided that NDI would focus on pre-election observation and, where possible, facilitate communication between political parties and the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).

In mid-February, NDI was asked by USAID to move forward with the program as quickly as possible. NDI hired a resident representative in February and began preparations for an international delegation to assess Ethiopian preparations for the May 15 elections. In February 2005, NDI's program director met with the acting chair of the NEBE to discuss NDI's program and NDI staff members who would be working in the lead up to the May 15 elections. The office expressed willingness to cooperate with NDI upon registration.

On March 7, the assessment group arrived in Addis and met with non-governmental organizations, political parties, officials from the NEBE, and the donor and international community. Meeting requests were submitted repeatedly to the government and EPRDF officials, but NDI never received a response. The team included Pat Merloe, NDI's Director for Electoral Processes, Keith Jennings, President and CEO, African American Human Rights Foundation and specialist in human rights and democracy and governance programs, Nora Schimming Chase, Member of Parliament, Namibia and Congress of Democrats Vice President, and Ocheing Mbeo, Member of East African Legislative Assembly, Kenya.

During this assessment, USAID indicated that it did not want NDI to proceed with the planned pre-election observation and expressed a desire for the Institute to conduct a program similar to that originally proposed—focusing on facilitating dialogue between political parties and the NEBE. NDI agreed and shifted focus away from pre-election observation to facilitating this dialogue and began laying the groundwork for such a program.

Between late February and late March, NDI brought a total of nine election experts to Ethiopia. All received business visas with the exception of one individual, who requested a business visa at the Addis airport, but was mistakenly provided a tourist visa by Ethiopian immigration officials.

Throughout this period, NDI made repeated requests to meet with the representatives of the governing coalition, EPRDF, to discuss its programs and the registration process, but a meeting was not granted. On March 30, NDI, IRI and IFES were summoned to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate for Europe and America, and instructed to leave Ethiopia within 48 hours for not being “legally” registered. NDI representatives departed the country on April 1.

In November 2004, NDI began the process to register as a non-governmental organization in Ethiopia, through the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC. During this entire quarter, NDI was in close contact with the Embassy and attempting to register as an NGO in Ethiopia. Despite complicated procedures and, at times, contradictory instructions by the Ethiopian Embassy, by March 10, 2005, all required documents had been submitted to the Embassy and NDI was awaiting notification of registration. Embassy officials were positive about NDI’s application and expressed confidence throughout the process that registration would be approved. During the period between November 2004 and March 2005, NDI met with or spoke directly to representatives of the Ethiopian Embassy 10 times regarding the application process and NDI’s planned activities. This included a February 2005 meeting between NDI’s president and the Ethiopian ambassador to the United States.

On March 30, the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expelled NDI, IRI and IFES from Ethiopia, giving them 48 hours to leave the country. The purported reasons for expulsion was that the three organizations were not legally registered as NGOs; that they had not informed the Government of Ethiopia (GOE) of their planned activities; and that staff were traveling under tourist visas. This decision was made despite the fact that all three groups had made attempts to lawfully register; that numerous meetings had been held between the three democracy organizations and representatives of the GOE, both in Addis Ababa and in Washington, DC; and that the partners’ staff were traveling on lawful business visas.

IV. RESULTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The overall goal of the program is to enhance public confidence and participation in the electoral process for the 2005 national elections. Specific program objectives are:

Objective 1: To demonstrate domestic and international interest in and provide information concerning the overall legitimacy and support for a transparent and fair electoral process in Ethiopia;

Objective 2: To identify potential challenges to a transparent and fair electoral process and recommend ways to enhance the process; and

Objective 3: To facilitate dialogue between political parties and electoral stakeholders to aid in resolving disagreements prior to the May 2005 elections.

NDI has no results to report at this time.

V. EVALUATION

NDI is unable to evaluate this program at this time.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

It is uncertain that this program will continue and, at present, it would be difficult for NDI to play a constructive role in Ethiopia prior to the May 15 elections. NDI is following the elections from afar and urging appropriate reaction from NGOs, policy groups and lawmakers to the CEPPS partners' expulsion from Ethiopia. NDI is also in close consultation with USAID and its CEPPS partners.